

3.1 The causes of unbelief

From C. J. Ellicott, Modern Unbelief: Its Principles and Characteristics, 1877. The Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol is expressing in a lecture of 1877 the dismay of churchmen at the tide of unbelief which threatens the faithful.

[Y]esterday I stated generally the subject on which I felt it my especial duty to speak at the present time, -- existing unbelief, its nature and prevalence, and the best means of counteracting it.

If I may now assume that the subject does demand our attention and that even the most hopeful can hardly deny that an unbelief of the most grave and menacing character is now stealing into the hearts of the young and speculative, if this be so, why is it so?

Of the many causes which may be assigned, there are three which seem to claim our more especial consideration, - the tone and direction of recent historical criticism, the deductions that have been drawn from the real or alleged discoveries of modern science, and the moral and metaphysical difficulties which have been supposed to be involved in or connected with the fundamental doctrines of Christianity.

Let us speak first of recent historical criticism, and the injurious influence it has certainly exercised in reference to Revealed Religion. Its leading position has always been the same - that any narration of facts which involves the miraculous element in it must, for this very reason, be regarded with the gravest suspicion.

... Why ... is the ... miraculous element in the history of the New Testament to be regarded otherwise than as involving a *prima facie* reason why the narrative should not be accepted as historically credible? The answer to these objections is, happily, fair and reasonable.

The narrative of the Old Testament, and still more so that of the New Testament, is so essentially different in nature and character from that of the early and legendary narratives with which they have been compared, that the presence of the miraculous element in the one suggests no just ground for concluding, merely because that element is present in the other, that the associated narrative is consequently mythical and untrustworthy. .

The narrative of the New Testament does not refer to, or include a remote past, but relates events which, it is alleged, took place at a definite time in the world's history, when the principles of history were generally known and recognized. Unless, therefore, it can be shown that the narrative was composed so long after the events that mythical additions would have had time to grow up around them, no just argument, on historical considerations ... can be used against the credibility of the narrative on the ground of the presence of the miraculous .

I do not wish in any way to represent the case worse than it is, -but I certainly fear that even among sober and religious persons the number of those who feel real difficulties in reference to many things in the Old Testament is distinctly increasing. And this increase is in a great measure due to the evil effects produced by the historical criticism to which I am now alluding, left unchallenged and unexamined as that criticism too often is by the otiose if not receptive reader . .

And if this, only too often, be the effect of current historical criticism, when applied to the Holy Scriptures, still more serious is the effect produced by the speculative deductions that have been made from the real or alleged discoveries of modern science. I advisedly say real or alleged, - for I am persuaded that many scientific theories of the present day which are now current and popular, will in the sequel have to be seriously reconsidered and modified. Or ... in reference to

the most popular subject of all, evolution, - how is it able to account for that similarity of the ultimate particles of matter which may now be said to have been almost demonstrated? If the molecule is 'incapable of growth or decay, of generation or destruction', how can we reconcile such characteristics with the operation of those purely natural causes which are now so persistently claimed to be the constructive principles of the universe? Such questions . . . could be multiplied almost indefinitely, in reference to several alleged discoveries which are causing considerable anxiety to many religious minds at the present time. The questions, however, are overlooked. .

The uncertainties of modern physical science are by no means to be regarded as existing only in the minds of prejudiced theologians.

It may be admitted, however, that though most of the more startlingly popular theories are either still utterly uncertain, or, like the principle of Natural Selection, are found to require very serious rehabilitation, there remain some at least that seem to militate with received opinions, and are consequently causing to many minds very great disquietude. It may be admitted, for example, that, in a certain sense, the principle of evolution is apparently supported by trustworthy evidence. It seems also probable that the existence of man upon the earth is to be referred to a period slightly more distant than that which has commonly been assigned - and it perhaps may be conceded that, in the origination of species, laws hitherto not recognized may be considered now to rest on sufficient induction.

What, however, does it amount to beyond this - that our adorable Creator has permitted the creatures of His hand to catch clearer glimpses, as the ages roll onward, of the blessed mysteries of His providential wisdom and power. And this which ought really to dispose our hearts to deeper reverence and more adoring love, has been made to become to us a source of hindrances and temptations. These silently disclosed mysteries which ought to awaken in each true and loving soul a more lively apprehension of the mercy and majesty of the Creator, have been perverted by the cold heart of unbelief or the vanity of a spurious science into arguments against the truth of revealed religion, and have been made to minister to distrust in the holy reality of the fatherhood of God.

During the past hundred years, and especially during the last portion of that time, the All-Good, the All-wise, and the All-Merciful has permitted the creatures of His hand to see far, far, more clearly than in any centuries of the past, the glory and the majesty of His works.

I feel, therefore, that it may be truly said, that though it does seem certain that the alleged discoveries of recent science, and, still more, the rash and unlicensed deductions that have been made from them, have caused the greatest possible amount of doubt and disquietude in thousands of hearts, - yet that these two things also are certain. First, that of these alleged discoveries some are, in a very high degree, scientifically doubtful. Secondly, that of these same discoveries, those which apparently seem to be trustworthy are distinctly evidences, not, as it is alleged, against, but *for* the blessed truth of the existence and personality of God, and that, too, in a very marked and even providential manner.

But, in the third place, if much of the unbelief of our own times is to be referred to this misuse of the blessings of which true science is designed to be the minister, still more distinctly may we trace the prevalence of unbelief to the moral and metaphysical difficulties which have been supposed to be involved in the fundamental truths of the Christian dispensation.

The problem of the existence of evil, especially the traces of the misery and suffering of living creatures, ages before man's sin cast its shadow on the creation around, - the still deeper problems

connected with the holy mystery of sin's atonement, and the dark and terrible questions that are connected with the doom of the impenitent - these three aspects of physical and moral evil do, beyond all doubt, fearfully try the faith of thousands at the present time. They subtly appeal to the poor doubting heart, and at once ally themselves with the difficulties which may have already been suggested by historical criticism, or scientific speculation. Our very increased knowledge becomes a snare to us. The more science displays to us the wonders of the realms of nature around us, the further we see into the beauty and the glory of the marvellous works of God, - the more terrible seems the difficulty connected with the power and presence of evil . . . They readily combine with the difficulties arising from other considerations. Each class of difficulties helps to augment the force of the others, - and the result is that tendency to doubt everything, and to consider everything opinionable which I cannot but regard as the very worst and most menacing sign of our times.

Note

1. Historical Criticism: Or 'Higher Criticism', is the criticism of the Bible based on contemporary research, which demonstrates that certain 'facts' of authorship, chronology, the miraculous, etc. are scientifically inaccurate, or otherwise unsound.